

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

## The “Pastrone System”: Itala Film from the Origins to World War I

**This is the author's manuscript**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/119984> since 2015-12-11T18:03:49Z

*Publisher:*

Indiana University Press

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

## **The 'Pastrone System':**

### **Itala Film from the Origins to World War I**

Silvio Alovio

#### **Before Itala: Carlo Rossi & Co.**

While the first Italian film was released in 1905, it was only around 1906 and 1907 that the national industry began to take off. Along with new investments, production companies, distribution exchanges, and permanent movie theaters, a growing working-class audience came into existence.<sup>1</sup> In a time of radical transformations and modern opportunities, the city of Turin presented several conditions (economic, technological, and cultural) favorable to the development of a national film industry.<sup>2</sup>

Itala Film was created in Turin in 1908 from the remnants of another film company based in that city, Carlo Rossi & Co, which had closed down shortly before.<sup>3</sup> Formally created by Carlo Rossi and Guglielmo Remmert in 1907, this new company hired technicians from Pathé right away, according to a practice first adopted by Cines and later by Itala.<sup>4</sup> During this early phase in the summer of 1907, Rossi hired a young and inexperienced twenty-five-year-old accountant, Giovanni Pastrone. At Carlo Rossi & Co., Pastrone had an impressive career and within few months he was made its chief executive.

---

<sup>1</sup> Aldo Bernardini, *Industrializzazione e classi sociali*, in Renzo Renzi (ed.), *Sperduto nel buio: il cinema muto italiano e il suo tempo* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1991), 22-33.

<sup>2</sup> By 1908, Turin produced about 60% of the national film output, while Rome remained at about 20-30%. Between 1910 and 1915, Turin produced almost half of all Italian films.

<sup>3</sup> See *CMI*, vol. 2, 103-108.

<sup>4</sup> Within a few months, several technicians arrived in Turin. Charles Lépine, former studio director at Pathé, Eugène Planchat and Georges Caillaud, operator-cinematographers, and Eugène Zoellinger, a Swiss technician. On the relationship between the French technical personnel and Turinese silent cinema, see Maria Adriana Prolo, 'Francesi nel cinema italiano muto', *Bianco & Nero* 14, nos. 8-9 (1953): 69-74; Aldo Bernardini, 'Le cinéma français et la naissance du cinéma en Italie: modèles et limites', in *Les vingt premières années du cinéma français* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1995), 329-336. On the activity of Lépine in Turin see Alberto

In one year of activity, Rossi had given his company an international dimension but he was not a proficient administrator. On February 1908, following a disagreement over internal restructuring plans that Remmert had designed with his father-in-law, engineer Carlo Sciamengo, Rossi liquidated the company.<sup>5</sup> Remmert, Sciamengo and Pastrone wanted to rebuild the firm, even if that meant creating a new one. A few months later, possibly in May 1908, a new company, called Itala Film, began production.<sup>6</sup> Sciamengo was the chief executive and Pastrone its artistic director. There were several continuities with Rossi & Co.: the offices were the same; Itala's first films were simply re-releases of Rossi's, with the addition of a new logo and different intertitles; the personnel came from the 'old' company and even the new company's trademark was graphically similar to Rossi's. Most importantly, Itala made use of Rossi's unique distribution network. The company had been one of the earliest ones to penetrate foreign markets.<sup>7</sup>

In its early stages, Remmert held the ownership of Itala. Shortly afterward, however, he left managerial responsibility to Sciamengo, the majority shareholder (although formally the transfer of ownership would occur only in 1911). Meanwhile, Pastrone expanded his role from artistic director to include large administrative duties. [fig.1]

### **The 1908/09 Crisis and Itala's International Expansion**

Itala emerged during a period of crisis in the film industry, both in Italy and abroad. As often occurs in new industries, the crisis was connected to fast expansion and ensuing

---

Friedmann, 'Appunti per la storia di un formato substandard. Due proposte torinesi' in Michele Canosa ed., *Cinema muto italiano: tecnica e tecnologia, vol.II: Brevetti, machine, mestieri* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), 97-100.

<sup>5</sup>See Franco Prono, 'Atti di nascita del cinema a Torino', in Ira Fabri (ed.), *Le fabbriche della fantasticheria* (Turin: Aleph, 1993), 81.

<sup>6</sup>Recent archival research has shed light on Itala's financial history, while still uncertain is the exact date of its foundation. See Silvio Alovisio, 'Proposte di studio su un archivio aziendale. L'Itala Film negli archivi del Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino', in *NSB*, 73-87.

<sup>7</sup>The first one to reach the British market via The Hepworth Manufacturing Co. Ltd., Rossi & C. had also established solid contacts with Germany (via Otto Schmidt), France and Belgium (via Paul Hodel). On December 1907, the Turinese company had also started exporting in the US, under contract with the Chicago-based Kleine Optical Co.

overproduction.<sup>8</sup> In this period of transition, the film medium was radically transforming its language and technology while trying to attract new audiences. In the early 1910s, although distribution was locally structured, a new marketing system of film rentals began to emerge. Meanwhile, the drastic reorganization of the American film industry, under Edison's attempted domination of the domestic market with the MPPC, was threatening to keep Italian companies out of the vital US market.

In this uncertain situation, new companies such as Itala found opportunities for growth and development. Taking full advantage of what Carlo Rossi & Co. had put into place (an experienced administration, international contacts, and even modern equipment) and combining it with solid capital and new managerial skills, Itala survived the emergency with new initiatives on the international scene. When the most powerful European film producers met in Paris in February 1909 to study common solutions to the crisis and to restructure the market, Itala's Carlo Sciamengo played an important diplomatic role on behalf of the Italian film industry. He fought the Pathé-inspired new renting policy and tried to address the crucial issue of the MPPC's protectionist scheme. Domestic markets, especially in Italy, were not enough to support an industrial expansion; the immense American market was a necessary outlet. In those years, Itala conducted an aggressive marketing campaign to gain access to foreign markets. In 1910, through an alliance with Tyler Film Co., it became the greatest exporting company in the United Kingdom. In Russia, Sciamengo established exclusive relationships with Hanzonkov, the biggest domestic distributor, while in France Itala was able to exhibit two to three new films per week. Still, the

---

<sup>8</sup> See A. Bernardini, 'An Industry in Recession: The Italian Film Industry 1908-1909', *Film History* 3, no. 4 (1989): 341-368; Riccardo Redi, 'La crisi del 1909 e il Congrès des dupes', *Immagine* 33 (Winter 1995-1996): 6-16.

American market remained the subject of the Turinese company's most ambitious commercial plans.<sup>9</sup>

Between 1909 and 1910, Sciamengo made two business trips to the United States. During the first one (accompanied by Arturo Ambrosio) he refused to accept the conditions dictated by the Edison trust. Thus, Itala entered into business with a few independent distribution companies: Film Import and Trading Co., New York Motion Pictures Co., and Bison –whose films Itala distributed in Italy.<sup>10</sup> During the second trip, Sciamengo entered partnership with another independent firm, the Motion Picture Distributing and Sales Co., and ensured them of two weekly releases. The results of these strategic expansions were remarkable: between 1908 and 1911 Itala was the most important Italian film exporter in the US. The success of Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (The Fall of Troy, 1911) appeared to threaten the General Film Company's monopoly.

To strengthen its position, Itala opened a New York branch, Itala Film Co. of America in 1912, linked to the distribution network of Film Supply Co. of America. Despite the company's ambitions, however, that year its US exports began to decrease, likely due to interrelated causes: the company's obstinate and exhausting preference for feature films and the equally all-consuming preparations for *Cabiria* (1914).

### **Labor Division**

Compared to the standards of contemporary Italian cinema, Giovanni Pastrone set up a sophisticated and advanced production system. The Museo Nazionale del Cinema (Turin) has preserved an astonishing pre-1914 document that details the company's production regulations

---

<sup>9</sup> On the commercialization of Itala's films in the US, see Paolo Cherchi Usai, 'Maciste all'Hell's Kitchen. Il cinema muto torinese negli Stati Uniti', in Paolo Bertetto and Gianni Rondolino (eds.), *Cabiria e il suo tempo* (Milan: Il Castoro, 1998), 132-148.

<sup>10</sup> A Bison Register (#101) is preserved in the *Itala Film Collection* (A160/6), Museo Nazionale del Cinema (Turin).

and policies at a time in which the national film industry still did not clearly distinguish among professional roles and tasks.<sup>11</sup>

In the production process, the first step was the preparation of the story outline (*soggetto*). Before finishing it, the writer was to give the company the opportunity to evaluate the inherent production costs ('when he has completed two-thirds of the scenes, he must inform the manager's office.') Once the story outline had been prepared, the artistic director began detailing 'all the materials necessary for the completion of the film.' He had the power to suggest 'those changes that appear useful to him, although once the script has reached a definitive version, he cannot but follow the written instructions.'

When the production plan was set, the film director negotiated with the front office and with other directors for the use of the available studios. Then the shooting would begin, regulated by a precise daily schedule. During shooting, the directors' authority depended on the cameraman who had the final word over outside lighting. The equivalent of the stage director had the responsibility to 'have the set ready half-an-hour before the beginning of each shooting session.' Actors were required to show up on the set 'dressed, with their make-up done, and ready to follow the director's order.' At the end of the day, a technician developed the dailies, verified their quality, and approved them for editing. In post-production, the director had 'the right to be present during editing, if he so wishes, and to express his comments on the process.'<sup>12</sup>

Pastrone divided the assignments according to a vertical structure, still hesitating between a direct (almost artisan) control of every step of the process and a hierarchical distribution of

---

<sup>11</sup> See *Itala Film Collection*, A159/3. All the following quotations are from the manuscript document. A published version appeared in *Notiziario del Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino* 40-41 (1981-1982): 17-22. [The gendered wording of the original document has been left untouched]

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

tasks. At Itala in the early 1910s several production modes coexisted.<sup>13</sup> They ranged from a sort of *director system*, which differentiated between ‘scriptwriter,’ director, and cameraman, to a distant approximation of the American *central producer system*, characterized by serial production, multiple shooting units, and a strong division of roles between *director* and *producer*. In the Italian context, in fact, there was not such a figure as the producer, whose position would have been between the director and the chief executive. But Itala had Giovanni Pastrone.

Pastrone's position and role illustrate Itala's peculiar internal organization. He was a co-owner, really a minority shareholder, yet in contrast to American producers à la Griffith, he could exercise direct control over the capital invested. More precisely, Pastrone's role was similar to the one played by Thomas Ince: he overviewed the preparation and production of all Itala's films in detail.<sup>14</sup> With reference to the American model, Pastrone furthered the distinction between *central producer* and *director* in his relationship with other directors at Itala. As for his own professional profile, however, such distinction was meaningless. He was both *central producer* and *director* until the end of his career in 1923. Trained within the old *operator system* he knew all the crafts and skills of film production. But by combining the owner-producer's common disposition for vertical hierarchy and personalized supervision with the modern division of labor and management, Pastrone became a unique kind of *producer* in the panorama of Italian film industry.

Between 1909 and 1912, Pastrone set out to develop an elaborately articulated and professionalized personnel at Itala. He hired several talented cameramen and directors from

---

<sup>13</sup> For distinctions among modes of production, see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). In particular, see Janet Staiger, ‘The Hollywood mode of production to 1930’, *Ibi*, 85-153.

<sup>14</sup> Pastrone himself recognized the dualism of his role at Itala: ‘I was a director, ok but I was also an industrialist, or better a businessman. I had to recoup the investments, and my films had to persuade distributors that they were doing great business.’ See G. Sadoul, ‘A colloquio con Giovanni Pastrone’, *Centrofilm 14* (1960): 11. The parallelism between Pastrone and Ince is suggested in Paolo Cherchi Usai (ed.), *Giovanni Pastrone e gli anni d'oro del cinema a Turin* (Turin: UTET, 1986), 7-10.

French and Italian companies and created a script department.<sup>15</sup> From the early 1910s, he had an average of six directors working full-time at Itala.<sup>16</sup> In 1912, he hired one of the world's most talented experts in optical effects, Segundo de Chomón, a decision that had an impressive artistic influence on the company's style and reputation.<sup>17</sup> In terms of actors, Pastrone expanded the staff, especially in 1911 and 1912. New performers arrived both from France and from Turin's surrounding region, trained either in films or in vernacular and amateur theater. Thus, Itala's collaboration with one of Europe's most renowned stage actor, Ermete Zacconi, was quite exceptional. In the early 1910s, Zacconi acted in two successful Itala films: *Padre* (Palace of Flame, 1912), directed by Gino Zaccaria, and *Lo scomparso* [Disappeared, 1913], directed by Dante Testa. [fig.2]

### Politics of Genre

When Itala was established, only a few genres had been explored by Italian film production: drama, comedy, and the actuality.<sup>18</sup> After 1911, the development of the feature film caused the decline of actualities and the expansion of comic subjects into longer features. Since Itala intended to invest and grow on an industrial level, none of these four genres was excluded. Clear manufacturing procedures were needed for each genre so as to achieve production optimization, consistency, and novelty. Pathé had already developed production standards and

---

<sup>15</sup> The list included Raoul Comte and Georges Caillaud from Pathé, but also Italian technicians Renato Bini and Silvio Cocanari, both 'first generation' employees respectively from SAFFI-Comerio and Cines. Their impact was phenomenal: Giovanni Tomatis, the extraordinary cameraman who shot the Northern African scenes of *Cabiria*, grew up professionally at Itala.

<sup>16</sup> Among the French directors, consider André Deed and Lucien Nonguet from Pathé, and Vincent Dénizot from Eclair. Among the Italians, Itala hired Gino Zaccaria and the directors and comedy writers Sandro Camasio and Mario Morais.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the work and impact of Segundo de Chomón at Itala Film, see Simona Nosenzo, 'Segundo de Chomón en la Itala Film: verosimilitud y artificio de lo imposible', *Archivos de la Filмотeca* 20 (1995): 105-112 and Silvio Alovisio, 'Entre la técnica i la poetica. Segundo de Chomón a la Itala Film', *Cinema Rescat* (Barcelona) 9 (2000): 17-21.



routines as early as 1904; Cines followed in 1907 and Ambrosio in 1908. Within a short time, Itala, too, reached the same levels, both in terms of variety and quantity of film output.

The chart [fig.3] offers a comparative overview of the four companies' film production between 1908 and 1914.<sup>19</sup> If the Pathé curve shows the remarkable superiority of the French company, the table suggests that by 1908 Itala, together with Cines and Ambrosio, led in domestic output.<sup>20</sup> That year, the newly born Turinese company (together with Carlo Rossi) comprised about thirty per cent of the total domestic production compared with Cines and Ambrosio, which each contributed twenty per cent. While in 1909 and 1910, the pace of production further increased due to the arrival of actor-director André Deed, between 1910 and 1911, Itala's output began to decline. Itala never regained its domestic market dominance. By 1911, with about twenty production companies working in the country, Itala's share was reduced to ten per cent. Deed's departure even affected the average film length, which fell to less than 1000 feet. After 1912, the production of actualities, so crucial in the first years, although much less so later, almost disappeared.<sup>21</sup>

In 1913, with the beginning of the filmmaking of *Cabiria*, the production gap between Itala and the other Italian firms widened dramatically. That year, Itala produced only five per cent of the national output, while Cines contributed a remarkable twenty-five per cent. To better assess this situation, one must note that 1913 marked the definitive establishment of feature film

---

<sup>18</sup> [In the Italian language it is possible to distinguish long and short comedy by referring to the former as *commedia* and to the latter as *comica*.]

<sup>19</sup> Quantities here discussed refer to film titles not film length. As filmographic sources I have used ACI and Henri Bousquet, *Catalogue Pathé des années 1896 à 1914* (Edition Henri Bousquet, 1993-1995). For the year 1908, I have incorporated the production of Carlo Rossi & C. with that of Itala in light of the business continuity between the two firms.

<sup>20</sup> Pathé's data refers to the production of the French company and to those of its partners (i.e. SCAGL, Film d'Arte Italiana).

<sup>21</sup> Between 1909 and 1912, Itala produced about sixty non-fiction films or 10 per cent of its total output. The genre comprised actualities, newsreels, touristic documentaries, commercials, didactic and scientific films –for which Itala was renown. Interestingly, in 1908 the other major Turinese company, Ambrosio, devoted to non-fiction half of its resources.

production in Italy. Itala was among the most enthusiastic supporters of this change and the quickest to drop the production of shorts and *comiche* (short comedies).

With the historical epic *La caduta di Troia* (The Fall of Troy, 1911), Itala was the first Italian film company to step beyond the 600-meter mark and to define two-reelers as ‘feature films.’<sup>22</sup> The company repeated itself that year with the *Grand Guignol* drama *La cella n. 13* (Cell n. 13, m. 610). An increase in footage was not granted to the genre of the historical epic and modern adventure drama without reason. Both had deep ties to popular entertainments like *feuilletons* and theatrical melodramas but were also linked to the more culturally prestigious domain of literary and historical classics. Thus they better embodied the goals of social expansion and cultural amelioration that Itala and other film producers had sought since 1910-11.

Itala’s first feature films attempted to combine literary ambitions with highly spectacular visual delights. The production alternated between austere but edifying films such as *Amore d’oltretomba* (After Darkness, Light, 1912) and *The Palace of Flame*, and adventure stories such as *Vittoria o morte* [Victory or Death, 1913], *Tigris* (1913), or violent and unsettling dramas such as *I misteri della psiche* (The Mysteries of Souls, 1912). Unlike Ambrosio and Cines, Itala did not devote feature production to the genre of comedy, preferring instead the release of two-reel *comiche* such as those starring Mario Morais and Ernesto Vaser. By 1913-14, the two-reel format was no longer synonymous with the feature film.

The company reacted quite conservatively to the outbreak of the First World War: production was temporarily suspended and then shortly resumed while simultaneously the workforce was cut. Because of its previous sparse output, Itala did not suffer the war crisis as much as Ambrosio and Cines, whose production decreased quite dramatically.

---

<sup>22</sup> On the stylistic and commercial novelty of the film, see Silvio Alovisio, ‘Kolossal in the Making: The Invention of Space in *La caduta di Troia*’, *Cinegrafie* 18 (2005): 333-355.

### Types of Comedies and Serialization

As already mentioned, Itala first produced in short comedies (*comiche*), from a fraction of a reel to up to two reels. In 1908, the percentage of *comiche* represented twenty to twenty-five per cent of Itala's yearly output (the same at Cines, although Itala produced more titles). In 1909, due to the arrival of actor and director André Deed, that percentage climbed to forty per cent and in 1910 it reached the peak of forty-five per cent.<sup>23</sup>

Itala's short comedies were of three kinds. The first one was the *trick comedy*, which was usually very short (less than 200 feet). The comic effect was tied to a bald subversion of common sense and the conventions of everyday life. A frequent strategy, common to the French genre of *dislocations mystérieuses*, was the dismembering and recomposition of the human body, as in *Un uomo a pezzi* (Man in Piece[s], 1908) or *Chi ha visto la mia testa?* (Who Has Seen My Head?, 1909). Ordinary objects became animated or provoked unusual reactions, as in *Armadio misterioso* [The Mysterious Wardrobe, 1908] and *Le peripezie di un materasso* [Adventures of a Mattress, 1908, Carlo Rossi].

The second type was the *farcical comic scene*. The prototype was Lumière's *L'arroseur arrosé*, but its length was expanded (up to 400 feet by 1908) and so its narrative articulation. Typical were the reproductions of variety theater sketches, as in *Il cugino mangiatore di tartufi* (He Is a Cousin Who Eats the Truffle, 1908) or *Il signor Testardo* (Mr. Stubborn, 1909). Mostly, the subgenre comprised reversals of social and biological order. Animals assumed anthropomorphic features in films like *Il cavallo salvatore* (Horse to the Rescue, 1908) and *Il*

---

<sup>23</sup> At Cines the percentage of comedies remained unchanged for 1909, while it climbed to 30-35 per cent in 1910, a comparatively modest increase despite the hiring of Ferdinand Guillaume (Tontolini), Lea Giunchi (Lea) and Pacifico Aquilanti (Cocò). On the central importance of the comic genre for Itala, but also for the scene of Turinese film productions of the 1910s, see Silvio Alovisio, 'Attrazioni, fughe e false: appunti sul cinema comico a Torino nei primi anni Dieci' in Maria Vasallo ed., *Insegnare storia con il cinema muto. Torino. Cinema, moda e costume nel primo Novecento* (Faenza: Associazione Clio 92, 2006), 95-130. On Deed at Itala, see Jean A. Gili, André Deed (Recco: Le Mani, 2005).

*cane spazzacamino* (Sweep Dog, 1910). Women displayed a tendency to violence heretofore unknown as in *Una signora furiosa* [An Enraged Woman, 1908]. Rituals of honor were usually dissolved into grotesque parodies like *Il duello dei paurosi* (Timid Duellers, 1908) while social roles were suspended in films like *Lo sciopero dei lattanti* (Baby Strike, 1908). The most vulgar parodies often alternated with social farces or *micro-pochade*, adapted from the tradition of French vaudeville comedies of married life, such as *Discussione ad oltranza* (You Shall Pay for It, 1909) and *Il capodanno della gelosa* (Jealous Wife's New Year's Day, 1910). The trivial nature of these carnivalesque inversions combined with the characters-heroes' limited interest in the outside world (as was the case with Deed) kept these *comiche* from being socially subversive. Instead, their ideological ambiguity displayed conservative traits: they ended up enforcing an ultimate sense of interclass compromise and unassailable social stability.

The last comic type was the *chase comedy*, one of Itala's specialties. The chessboard topography of the residential quarters outside Turin became an ideal location for the construction of a composite space that could be crossed by both famous and anonymous comedians.

In the first months of 1909, the hiring of André Deed and the beginning of a series based on a single well-developed character, *Cretinetti* (known in the US as 'Foolshead'), marked an increase in Itala's comic productions' quality. Deed made more than one hundred films at Itala, enabling the Turinese firm to be both the first and only Italian company to make serial comedies, at least through 1909. After his arrival, the key word at Itala was standardization, which extended its meaning from production to distribution. The comic genre became Itala's main resource for access to international markets.<sup>24</sup> The famous dilemma of whom to lure from Pathé, André Deed or Max Linder, was solved by opting for the comic who had first established and perfected serial

---

<sup>24</sup> The audience's vast appreciation of the genre increased the number of copies produced per each comedy, with the result that among Itala's surviving prints, more than 60 per cent are comedies.

production. Deed had started the Boireau series as early as 1906, whereas Linder had begun only in 1909. By acquiring Deed's celebrity and experience, Itala quickly grew, both financially and professionally.<sup>25</sup>

In Cretinetti's serial comedies, the genre's facility to draw from a variety of sources became institutionalized. On the one hand, Deed's characterizations owed a special debt to Nice's vernacular theater, songs, and jokes, but also to the French performative tradition of the Folies Bergères, Théâtre du Châtelet, Méliès's trick films, as well as Pathé's chase comedies (*poursuites*). On the other hand, Deed crystallized the compound structure of the genre into an efficient industrial format. The collaboration between Deed and Pastrone allowed a centralized scheduling of production. Itala's film product became easily exportable due to the combination of trademark and character, independent of the quality of any single film. Standardization as well as recognition and demand of a brand name were the traits of a blossoming industrial aesthetics. Deed played a character recognizable by his repeated actions, consistent world vision, and frantic narratives. For Cretinetti, space became a medium in which to communicate a restless and dynamic *cosmology*. The obsessive presence of spatial thresholds (skylight, doors, windows, elevators, stairs, shop windows, etc.) highlighted by a uniquely systematic use of long shots, emphasized Cretinetti's inability to inhabit ordinary spaces or places. For him, the streets of Turin were simply passageways in which to venture and violate, to exit from the thresholds of households, shops, and cafés. Attracted to and rejected by indoor and outdoor spaces, higher and lower places, even Paradise and Hell –staged in *Come fu che l'ingordigia rovinò il Natale a Cretinetti* (Greediness Spoils Foolshead's Christmas, 1910)—Cretinetti cannot remain still. Rest or stasis is not allowed him. This compulsive and neurotic mise-en-scène postulated and reinforced the star's precise

---

<sup>25</sup> Itala's representative in Paris, Paul Hodel, would sell Deed's works to exhibitors without even showing them. Cretinetti –known in France as Gribouille– allowed an average profit of 70/80 per cent per print while the standard

spatial cosmology. The persistence of this cosmology defined both the character's aesthetic and his serial marketability.

### **The historical Film: From *tableau vivant* to the Quality Film**

Throughout 1908-09, Italian film companies systematically structured their production around film genres. The combination of spectacular value, pedagogical significance, and cultural status launched the historical film as the most prestigious and profitable genre. The staging of history allowed Italian cinema to gain esthetic legitimacy and commercial viability among bourgeois audiences. Pastrone's move from the 210 meters of *Una congiura contro Napoleone I* [Plotting against Napoleon I, 1908] to the famous 3500 meters of *Cabiria* (1914) is the best example of this progress.

At Itala, the exploitation of the genre was systematic without being intense. Between 1908 and 1911, the company produced 'only' fifteen historical films, and in later years the annual output decreased, in concurrence with the production of *Cabiria*. In 1908, the average length of an Itala historical film was approximately 180-200 meters, or two-thirds of a reel, a size long enough for narratives rich in ellipses and *tableaux vivants*. The pedagogical exposition was often concentrated in the depiction of a single exceptional event, the historical biography's key episode, or in the simple depiction of a past historical setting.<sup>26</sup> Between 1909 and 1911, the historical genre gained wide international success, developed new ambitions and extended its average length.

---

profit did not exceed 25-30 per cent. See Sadoul, 'A colloquio con Giovanni Pastrone', 8.

<sup>26</sup> The narrative highlight was, for instance, a violent death in *Giordano Bruno* (1908), a glorious defeat in *L'eroe di Valmy* [Hero from Valmy, 1908], or the hero's poisoning in *Il principe di Challant* (Prince of Chalant, 1908). In other instances, the main attraction was the historical setting itself, with the events depicted being purely anecdotal, as in *Episodio medievale* (Medieval Episode, 1908) or *Un matrimonio sotto il Terrore* (Wedding Under Terror, 1908).

In 1909, *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar) and *Napoleone e la principessa di Hatzfeld* (Napoleon and Princess Hatzfeld) achieved great economic and critical success in America. A year later, the distribution of *Isabella d'Aragona* (Isabel of Aragona), *Luisa Strozzi* (Louise Strozzi), and *Agnese Visconti* (Agnes Visconti) did not encounter similar enthusiasm but then 1911 became Itala's triumphant year. *The Fall of Troy*, a daring production of 610 meters, was groundbreaking and served as an example for future productions. It was followed by the shorter (but still lengthy for the times) *Clio e Filete* (Clios and Phyletes, 475m).<sup>27</sup> After *The Fall of Troy*, the association of feature production and historical film became fixed. The extended length enabled the solution of the genre's two main concerns: the improvement of set designs for spectacular effects and the extension of subjects' variety (biographies and literary adaptations) to achieve narrative sophistication. The overall ambition, in Pastrone's retrospective observations, was that 'cinema had to be presented as an art.'<sup>28</sup> [fig.5]

Indeed, the association of cinema as a potentially popular medium with the texts and symbols of highbrow culture started quite early at Itala. The 1908 historical productions were much more than simple depictions of past anecdotes. Although constrained by a short format, they combined popular iconography with adaptations from known historical biographies or major literary works, such as *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar, 1909), *Principessa e schiava* (Princess and Slave, 1909) and the already mentioned *The Fall of Troy* and *Clios and Phyletes*. Others were adaptations of contemporary sources as in *Niccolò de' Lapi* (Niccolo De Lapi, 1909) from Massimo D'Azeglio's historical novel (1866), *La maschera di ferro* (The Iron Mask, 1909) from the famous work of Alexander Dumas père, and *La marchesa Ansperti* (Marchioness of Ansperti,

---

<sup>27</sup> In 1910, only two Italian films exceeded the 400-meter length: Cines' *Giovanna la Pazza* [Johanna, The Mad Queen, 438m] and Film d'Arte Italiana's *Il Trovatore* (437m).

<sup>28</sup> Sadoul, 9

1911), adapted from Gerolamo Rovetta's play, *Romanticismo* (1902), which was also made into a film by Cines, Film Artistica Gloria and Ambrosio.

Overall, Itala's historical production was organized around three major strands. The first mainly catered to the domestic market and dealt with the drama of political unification. Some examples include: *I carbonari* [The Conspirators, 1908], *Vita per vita* (Life for a Life, 1909), and *La figlia del patriota* [The Patriot's Daughter, 1909]. The second strand comprised productions set in medieval and Renaissance times, which aimed at both domestic and international markets. Between 1910 and 1911, Itala made six biopics devoted to important women living in that period: *Agnese Visconti* (Agnes Visconti, 1910), *Isabella d'Aragona* (Isabelle of Aragon, 1910), *Caterina duchessa di Guisa* (Katerina, Duchess of Guise, 1910), *Ginevra di Scozia* (1910), *Luisa Strozzi* (Louise Strozzi, 1911) and *Giovanna di Braganza* (Joanna of Braganza, 1911).

The third strand of films regarded those historical and biographical productions preeminently made for the European markets, especially France and England --apparently the American market favored historical epics set in Greek and Roman times. Titles such as *Il sire di Montmorency* (Lord of Montmorency, 1909), *Linda di Chamounix* (Linda of Chamouny, 1910), *Giovanni Milton* (John Milton, 1911), *Il cinque marzo* [March 5th, 1910], were all productions that staged events unrelated to Italy's past history and culture, but that dealt with modern and contemporary historical events, such as the French Revolution. [fig.6]

### **Between Paradigm and Exception: The Case of *Cabiria***

As mentioned above, the crisis of 1908-09 ended with a strong increase in production. The progressive systematization of production and distribution changed the ways Italian movies were designed and marketed. The ultimate combination of financial shrewdness and technical skills was



best embodied a few years later by *Cabiria*. The film occupied a contradictory place within the ‘Itala system,’ caught between tradition and innovation.<sup>29</sup> [fig.6]

On the one hand, *Cabiria* continued Itala’s and Italian cinema’s inclination toward monumental historical production, learned cultural references, and widely popular spectacular appeal.<sup>30</sup> But, Pastrone’s plan to complete something exceptional --in terms of length, profusion of means, and cultural status-- ended up depressing the pace and standards of the company’s ordinary production. And this occurred in 1912 while Itala was gaining momentum in domestic and foreign markets. If *Cabiria*’s success appeared to have opened up rich distribution possibilities while the film’s profits encouraged further expansion of studio facilities, the film could not establish any new commercial standards.<sup>31</sup> The economic and labor resources invested in the film’s completion had been excessive and disproportionate: its success was achieved at the expense of Itala’s other exports, which dramatically decreased. After *Cabiria*, Itala abandoned any ambition to produce colossal films. At the beginning of the First World War, Pastrone moved on to other spectacular genres, mainly opting for the modern passionate drama filled with irresistible divas, or for the serial adventures centered on the muscular Maciste.

Sitting between continuity and difference, *Cabiria* reinforced the European cinema’s stylistic paradigm based on the centrality of the shot (or its ‘autarchy,’ as Noël Burch has defined it),<sup>32</sup> at the expense of editing. But by adopting the exceptional solution of the tracking shot, while

---

<sup>29</sup> The latest volume of contributions on *Cabiria* is Silvio Alovisio and Alberto Barbera, eds., *Cabiria & Cabiria* (Milan: Il Castoro, 2006), published on the occasion of a recent restoration of the film.

<sup>30</sup> Films such as *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (Antony and Cleopatra, Cines, 1913), *Spartaco* (Spartacus, Pasquali, 1913), and *Nerone e Agrippina* [Nero and Agrippina, Gloria, 1914], share the same ambition of ‘grand edification.’

<sup>31</sup> Friedemann, *Le case di vetro: stabilimenti cinematografici e teatri di posa a Torino* (Turin: Biblioteca FERT, 2002), 129-134.

<sup>32</sup> Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 149 passim.

remaining within the traditional boundaries of the single shot, the film resulted in something quite innovative.

In *Cabiria*, one can detect the safe experimental innovations realized in Itala's previous films: the panning shots of *The Fall of Troy*, the visionary special effects of *Tigris*, and also the narrative symmetries of *Come una sorella* [Like a Sister, 1912]. We might describe Pastrone's typical tactics as inspired by the desire to renew styles and productions and devise new 'functional equivalents',<sup>33</sup> while safely respecting proven commercial standards. Efforts as experimentation and new stylistic possibilities did not initiate a legacy, even if one considers such sophisticated later films as *Il fuoco* [Fire, 1915] and *Tigre reale* [Royal Tiger, 1916]. After 1914, Pastrone failed in his ambition to create a modern company, capable of producing both standard commercial products as well as films of exceptional artistic quality. World War One erased Itala's fruitful paradoxes and sent it to join in the general misfortunes of Italian cinema.[fig. 8]

*Translated by Silvia Marchetti, with Giorgio Bertellini and Ken Garner*

---

<sup>33</sup> The expression is from David Bordwell, 'The classical Hollywood style 1917-1960', in D. Bordwell, J. Staiger, and K. Thompson, 5. On the stylistic effects of the dynamics tradition/innovation in *Cabiria*, see Elena Dagrada, André Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning, 'Lo spazio mobile del montaggio e del carrello in *Cabiria*', [The Dynamic Space of Editing and Traveling Shots in 'Cabiria'] in Bertetto and Rondolino (eds.), cit., 151-183; Silvio Alovisio, 'El poder de la puesta en escena: *Cabiria* entre atracción y el relato', *Archivos de la Filmoteca* 20 (1995): 83-104.